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SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [ETRD](#) [PREL](#) [ELAB](#) [CS](#)

SUBJECT: ANTI-CAFTA FORCES HEARTENED BY SUCCESSFUL PROTEST

REF: A. SAN JOSE 1153

[1B](#). SAN JOSE 2215

[1C](#). SAN JOSE 2248

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SUMMARY

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[11](#). On November 17, about 10,000 protesters participated in the first major demonstration to follow President Abel Pacheco's presentation of the U.S.-Central America-Dominican Republic Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA-DR) to the Legislative Assembly. While the demonstration, organized by labor and student unions, was generally considered a great success for the organizers, its draw was limited to members of the organizing bodies, which pro-CAFTA business leaders were quick to point out. More demonstrations are expected in the coming months as the Legislative Assembly debates the free trade agreement; the success of the November 17 march will undoubtedly energize opposition forces and encourage ambitious plans for future events. End summary.

[12](#). On November 17, labor unions and student groups staged what was anticipated to be a major demonstration against CAFTA-DR. Participants convened in various locations around the capital and later converged on the Legislative Assembly buildings, where legislators are expected to begin the long process of CAFTA-DR ratification later this month. The protesters were generally peaceful, and many carried signs denouncing every public figure that has come out in support of CAFTA-DR. Simultaneously, there were other, smaller anti-CAFTA demonstrations throughout the country.

[13](#). The march was organized and attended primarily by four groups: the National Association of Public and Private Employees (ANEP), the unions of the Costa Rican Electricity Institute (ICE), the Secondary School Teachers' Association (APSE), and student groups from the University of Costa Rica. Several national political figures participated in the event, among them minor presidential candidates Humberto Arce and Walter Munoz and several anti-CAFTA-DR legislators. Other anti-CAFTA-DR demonstrations are expected to follow over the coming months. Pro-CAFTA-DR groups are organizing their own demonstration on November 24.

[14](#). Estimates on the size of the crowd have varied widely. Influential daily newspaper La Nacion offered a graphical analysis of crowd density and a resulting estimate of 18,000 participants. Costa Rican security officials told us informally that their estimate, based on the number of busses involved, was closer to 7,800. Based on pictures and eyewitness accounts from embassy personnel, the actual number of participants was likely somewhere between those two estimates. Embassy, which witnessed the demonstration, has settled on a round 10,000. Event organizers were a bit more fanciful in their estimations, with Albino Vargas, the head of ANEP and one of the country's leading anti-CAFTA-DR figures, estimating the crowd at 50,000, and Jesus Vasquez, head of the teachers' union, shooting for the moon with an estimate of 80,000.

[15](#). Regardless of the actual numbers, the march was considered an enormous success for the anti-CAFTA-DR movement. After several lackluster, poorly attended events over the past year (see reftels), organizers were able to rally thousands in a peaceful, colorful demonstration of opposition to the free trade agreement. Business leaders also claimed victory, however, citing scant support for the demonstrations outside the organizing groups.

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COMMENT

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[16](#). The relative success of this event will undoubtedly encourage opposition leaders to push forward with plans for more demonstrations, especially when debate in the Legislative Assembly begins. Prior to the November 17 demonstration, many observers had written off the opposition's ability to organize large anti-CAFTA-DR crowds. While they have proven skeptics wrong for now, they still face a daunting challenge to deliver their promised nationwide strikes, the threat of which for months caused President Pacheco not to send CAFTA-DR to the Legislative Assembly.

